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LETTER DATED 15 JANUARY 1999 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF ERITREA TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

I have the honour to forward to you a press release issued on 15 January 1999 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Eritrea (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would kindly circulate the text of the present letter and its annex as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Haile MENKERIOS
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

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Annex

Press release dated 15 January 1999 from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Eritrea concerning Ethiopia's intention to unleash war

The Government of Eritrea issued a statement on 12 January 1999 warning of Ethiopia's planned attack against Eritrea. This warning was based on various indicators, including tangible activities on the ground, reports leaked by Western intelligence sources and the accounts of defecting Ethiopian soldiers, whose number is increasing each day.

However, in characteristic fashion, the Ethiopian Government is trying to deny these facts, accusing Eritrea of "drawing attention to a fictitious impending offensive". It has, moreover, resorted to well-known distortions to portray Eritrea as desirous of impeding the peace process being carried out by the Organization of African Unity (OAU). In reality, however:

1. It is Ethiopia which inexplicably declared, on 6 January 1999, that the "peace process has come to an end". This declaration was made despite the fact that the OAU High-Level Delegation remains seized of the border dispute in accordance with the decision of the Central Organ. Eritrea explicitly reaffirmed, in its letter of 18 December 1998, its desire to cooperate with OAU to promote the peace process already under way.

2. OAU has not "ascertained that Eritrea is the aggressor", as the Ethiopian statement falsely asserts. Paragraph 7 of the OAU proposal indeed reads: "In order to determine the origins of the conflict, an investigation should be carried out on the incidents of 6 May 1998 and any other incident prior to that date that could have contributed to a misunderstanding between the two Parties regarding their common border, including the incidents of July and August 1997". Eritrea has welcomed this proposal. But Ethiopia has been opposed to any investigation because it knows that it was the aggressor that launched the unprovoked attack on 6 May 1998 and the party that committed aggression in Bada and Badme in July 1997.

3. It was Ethiopia that escalated the armed clashes in Badme into a confrontation along the entire boundary between the two countries: declaring total war on 13 May 1998; launching an attack on the Zalambesa front on 31 May 1998; and carrying out the first air strike on Asmara on 5 June 1998.

4. Finally, Ethiopia has rejected the call for a cessation of hostilities, although this is the primary point in the OAU proposal as well as in United Nations Security Council resolutions.

Indeed, if Ethiopia has no intention of launching war, then it should have no qualms in agreeing to a cessation of hostilities, including a total ban on air strikes.